SEX DIFFERENCES IN THE EFFECTS OF PARENTING

PRIMES ON MARRIAGE DECISIONS

by

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ABSTRACT

The current study shows that priming parenting motives has an effect on attitudes toward marriage. Parenting motives were primed by having male and female students view a series of images under the guise of completing a perceptual weight task, which included images of babies for those in the experimental condition. After viewing images of babies, women reported a younger age at which they would like to marry and more positive thoughts toward getting married in the next five years compared to women who did not view baby images. Men who viewed images of babies, on the other hand, reported a desire to marry at a later age and more negative thoughts toward getting married in the next five years compared to men in the control condition. Men with a high perceived mate value were the most affected by the parenting prime. The results of this study suggest that evolutionary motives may prime individuals to adopt an attitude toward pursuing current life history goals.
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INTRODUCTION

Why did Charles Darwin decide to get married? At age 29, he had already completed his historic voyage of discovery on the *H. M. S. Beagle* and could have chosen to continue focusing primarily on his scholarly pursuits. Like many who face a momentous decision, Darwin turned to a pros and cons list toward getting married to help decide his future. He listed thoughts that favored marriage, including “children,” having someone to take care of the house, a wife being “better than a dog,” and the prospect of a solitary life should he remain unmarried. He also listed thoughts that opposed marriage, such as the expense and quarrels, loss of freedom to go where he liked, having less money for books, and a highly concerning possibility that his wife would dislike London, which would lead to “banishment and degradation with indolent, idle fool” (Lord, Hill, Holland, Yoke, & Lu, in press).

Upon finishing his list, Darwin proclaimed in his notes, despite an apparent balance between his pros and cons, that the overwhelmingly obvious answer was to marry. This resounding conclusion might have reflected the fact that the very first thought he listed as a reason to choose marriage was “children.” Interestingly, this thought and his decision, which resulted in his marrying his cousin Emma Wedgwood soon after, may have been influenced by his recent preoccupations. It is possible that when Darwin listed the pros & cons of getting married, he might have listed “children” first, viewed having children as very desirable, and decided to marry soon because he had recently been focusing intensely on his theory of evolution, which was heavily concerned with reproduction. This hypothesis about the effects of Darwin’s recent activities on his
desire for marriage is supported by recent research and theory on the fundamental pyramid of needs, life history theory, and priming effects.

**Pyramid of Needs**

According to evolutionary theory, parenting is a fundamental human need. In fact, for this reason, Kenrick, Griskevicius, Neuberg, & Schaller (2010) updated Maslow’s pyramid of needs to reflect important evolutionary motives that drive human behavior. Parenting stands at the apex in a modern hierarchy of fundamental human motives that range from survival to reproduction (Figure 1). The most basic human motive is survival, which includes immediate physiological needs like hunger and thirst, self-protection, and affiliation. The pyramid of needs can be seen as a sequence. Logically, people must first survive if they are to reproduce. If survival needs are satisfied, people can then focus also on reproduction, which includes mate acquisition, mate retention, and ultimately parenting. Developmentally, human infants are first concerned only with satisfying basic physiological needs, then self-protection, later affiliation, then status, then mate acquisition, mate retention, and finally parenting. Differences in focusing on survival-related versus reproduction-related needs are predicted by life history theory, which describes how natural selection shapes an animal’s life cycle to facilitate reproductive success.
Life History Strategies and Reproduction

According to life history theory, life events can cause people to proceed upward through the pyramid at either a slower or a faster pace. An individual must choose to devote current resources to somatic effort, which includes accumulating skills, knowledge, and maintaining one’s self, or to reproductive effort, which includes sexual competition, courtship, and childcare (Griskevicius, Delton, Robertson, & Tybur, 2011). The choice to engage in reproductive effort, for example, would involve a tradeoff in energy available to expend in acquiring education or furthering one’s career.

Women typically reach reproductive age quicker than men and also marry, and thus have children, sooner. This faster progression upward through the pyramid of needs may occur because women have a shorter reproductive window than men and because parenting is a more optimal strategy for women’s than for men’s reproductive success (Buss, 2003, 2004; Buss & Schmitt, 1993). Women can typically conceive children only until menopause, whereas men can impregnate women throughout their lives. Women,
therefore, should be motivated to reproduce at an earlier age than men. In most cultures, marriage is seen as a prelude to having children, so women should also be motivated to marry at an earlier age than men—a prediction supported by recent statistics (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Temporary focus on survival-related versus reproductive-related needs, however, can be prompted by momentarily salient stimuli in the immediate environment, or what is called “priming effects.”

**Priming Effects**

Making specific concerns momentarily salient through manipulations of the immediate environment is called “priming.” Momentary priming effects have been demonstrated empirically for attitudes, behaviors, values, and the survival and reproductive parts of the pyramid shown in Figure 1. In one study that primed survival needs, for example, male and female participants viewed clips of a serial killer stalking a female protagonist (Becker et al., 2010). Participants primed with this threat to self-protection demonstrated greater encoding efficiency, as shown by increased facial memory for Black and Arab faces but not for female or White faces. Priming a threat to self-protection caused individuals to adopt more negative attitudes toward outgroup members; these results aligned with stereotypical associations of potential to do harm and indicate that priming self-protection motives leads one to adopt strategies toward achieving safety, which in this case meant remembering the attacker’s facial features.

In another study that primed reproductive needs, specifically the mate acquisition goal, perceptions of the sex ratio in one’s environment influenced women’s attitudes toward marriage. Female students viewed a photo array that primed different perceptions of the availability of mates in the environment (Durante, Griskevicius, Simpson, Cantu,
& Tybur, 2012). When women viewed an arrangement of photos that featured an abundance of men, for example, women’s attitudes toward starting a family versus pursuing a career were more positive. When women viewed an arrangement that primed a scarcity of men, in contrast, they had a more positive attitude toward pursuing a career rather than starting a family soon. Additionally, women who had a low perceived mate value were the individuals most affected by the manipulation, presumably because they would have the hardest time attracting a man if there were a shortage of desirable mates to go around. Subtle alterations in environmental cues, such as availability of mates, were enough to affect women’s attitudes regarding whether energy was currently best spent in somatic or reproductive effort, as described by life history theory. In addition to activating mate acquisition motives, other research has focused on priming mate retention, another reproductive goal. When men and women were primed with an infidelity threat, for example, they expressed decreased desire to have and invest in children (Hill & DelPriore, 2013). These results suggest that priming threats to reproductive goals may have an effect on evolutionary motives of parenting, but few studies have examined the effects of directly priming parenting motives.

Priming works by triggering either positive or negative associations. Schwarz (2007) has suggested that attitudes follow a construal model; rather than being retrieved from memory as stable entities, attitudes are continually construed based on available information. For instance, a person’s implicit attitudes toward a male face might differ depending on available associations, specifically if the background is an urban street or a church (Wittenbrink, Judd, & Park, 2001). Likewise, one might have a positive attitude toward having a baby but may update this attitude to become more negative after being
kept up by a crying baby. Would a person’s attitude toward marriage change as a result of temporarily making certain information available, such as the possibility of having children?

The situated inference model of priming explains that primes alter the accessibility of prime-related mental content, making specific information temporarily more accessible (Loersch & Payne, 2011). People typically do not realize that their associations of the moment are different from those that might have come to mind with a different prime, in a different context. They believe that the associations of the moment originated from their own internal preferences, so they use the associations to solve whatever problems are afforded by their current situation. Darwin, for instance, might not have realized that working on the reproductive, sexual-selection aspects of his theory of evolution led him to generate “children” as his first thought about getting married, led him to regard “children” as a major plus, and then led him to seek a wife.

The present hypothesis was that primes in the immediate context, such as photos of cute babies, might temporarily stimulate positive associations to “getting married,” which would in turn make people want to get married sooner than they would otherwise. One caveat, however, is that this hypothesis might apply more to women than to men, because photos of cute babies might make women anxious to speed through the pyramid toward “parenting” before their reproductive years expire, whereas men might not be affected as much by the prime because they have so many more years remaining in which they can have children.
The Present Study

Few previous studies have attempted to prime the parenting need, which may have been the cause of Darwin’s decision to move in the direction of marriage. The goal of the present study was to test whether priming people with photos of cute babies might cause them to want to get married at an earlier age. To provide a meaningful test of this hypothesis, however, it was necessary to conceal the experimental intent. People who know that they are being primed in a deliberate attempt to influence their judgments do not show any priming effects (Loersch & Payne, 2012). The photos of babies that were intended to prime parenting needs in the present study, then, had to be disguised as part of an “unrelated study” in which participants were asked to judge the relative weights of various objects.

In addition, to test whether the baby photo primes altered the thoughts that participants associated with “getting married” (in the same way as presumably happened to Charles Darwin), participants in the present study were asked not only when they wanted to marry, but also to list the pros and cons that came to mind for getting married. Finally, it is well known that the more desirable people think they are to the opposite sex, the more choosy they are about mates and the less likely to settle for anything but an “ideal” marriage partner (Buss & Schmitt, 1993), so self-perceived “mate value” had to be measured as a possible moderator of the predicted effects.
METHOD

Participants

A total of 121 undergraduate students (79 females and 42 males) participated in an online study for course credit. Mean participant ages were 19.62 (SD = 1.43) for women and 19.81 (SD = 3.98) for men.

Procedure

As a cover story to disguise the true intent of the baby photos, students were told that the first activity was a perceptual weight task. On a computer screen, students viewed sets of three related objects, and they were asked to rank the weights of the three items pictured. The first six sets of objects were the same for each participant, which included fruits, cars, tools, kitchen items, pieces of technology, and clothing. For instance, in the first category students were shown pictures of a banana, an orange, and a lemon, and had to drag the images so that they would be in order from heaviest to lightest. Students in the experimental condition (n = 60) viewed a seventh set of images that showed three cute babies, while students in the control condition (n = 61) were done after they viewed the sixth category of images. Exposure versus non-exposure to the pictures of cute babies served as the independent variable.

All students were then asked to complete the “Future Plans Task,” where they reported the age at which they would like to get married and listed the pros and cons that came to mind when they thought about getting married in the next five years. Students then reported how positive or negative each listed pro and con was on a scale of -3 (extremely negative) to +3 (extremely positive). Finally, students answered questions regarding their perceived mate value (adapted from Landolt, Lalumie`re & Quinsey,
These questions included items such as “Members of the opposite sex that I like, tend to like me back” and “I receive many compliments from members of the opposite sex.”

RESULTS

Desired Age for Marriage:

To test whether the parenting prime had an effect on student’s age at which they wanted to get married, a 2 (Gender: male vs. female) X 2 (Condition: pictures of babies present vs. absent) between-subjects analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was conducted on age students wanted to get married, with students’ current age entered as a covariate. The results showed a significant interaction, $F(1,117) = 3.95, p = .049$ (see Figure 2), such that women desired to get married at a younger age after viewing pictures of babies ($M = 25.59, SD = 1.77$) compared to women in the control condition ($M = 26.03, SD = 2.02$), whereas men wanted to get married at an older age after viewing pictures of babies ($M = 27.79, SD = 4.94$) compared to men in the control condition ($M = 26.39, SD = 2.31$).

Figure 2.

Desired age to get married in men and women in babies vs. control conditions
Percent of Positive Thoughts Listed:

We were also interested in whether students listed a greater proportion of positive thoughts about marriage following exposure to the parenting prime. We calculated the proportion of positive thoughts listed by counting the number of positively valenced thoughts for each student, and then dividing that number by that student’s total number of thoughts. We conducted a 2 (Gender: male or female) X 2 (Condition: pictures of babies vs. control) between-subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA) on the percentage of positive thoughts listed. The results showed a significant interaction, $F(1,117) = 5.74, p = .018$ (see Figure 3), such that women who viewed images of babies had a higher percentage of positive thoughts about getting married in the next 5 years ($M = .64, SD = .27$) compared to women in the control condition ($M = .46, SD = .30$), whereas men who viewed images of babies had a lower percentage of positive thoughts ($M = .48, SD = .29$) compared to men in the control condition ($M = .56, SD = .28$).

Figure 3.

Percent of positive thoughts listed by men and women in parenting vs. control conditions
Average Valence or Positivity of Thoughts Listed:

Additionally, students perceived some of their thoughts as more positive than others, which suggested that some thoughts might have had more of an impact than others on their attitudes toward marriage. We calculated the mean valence of thoughts listed for each student in order to see if valence also differed across conditions. We conducted a 2 (Gender: male vs. female) X 2 (Condition: pictures of babies vs. control) between-subjects ANOVA on average valence of thoughts listed. The results showed a marginally significant interaction, $F(1,117) = 3.70, p = .057$ (see Figure 4), such that women’s thoughts about marriage had a more positive valence after viewing babies ($M = .1.49, SD = 2.14$) compared to women in the control condition ($M = .17, SD = 2.38$), whereas men who viewed babies listed thoughts with a lower mean valence ($M = .27, SD = .2.19$) compared to men in the control condition ($M = .58, SD = 2.05$).

Figure 4.

Average valence of thoughts listed by men and women in parenting vs. control conditions
**Perceived Mate Value:**

We also wanted to test whether perceived mate value had an effect on the age men and women wanted to get married after viewing the parenting prime. In order to test this research question, we split the data file and conducted multiple regression analyses examining men and women separately. For each analysis, the main effects of mate value and condition were entered as predictors in step 1 of a hierarchical regression analysis, and the interaction between mate value and condition (parenting vs. control) was entered in step 2. The results revealed that mate value did not predict the age at which women wanted to get married, $p > .05$, but there was a significant condition X mate value interaction for men, $t = 2.15, p = .038, (b = .26, \beta = .56)$ (see Figure 5). Following Aiken and West (1991), we probed the interaction by calculating the estimated mean difference in preferences for career for men who scored 1 SD above or below the mean on mate value.

At 1 SD below the mate value mean, men reported wanting to get married at a similar age regardless of whether they were exposed to the pictures of babies ($p > .05$). At 1 SD above the mate value mean men who were exposed to the pictures of babies reported wanting to get married at a later age compared to men in the control condition ($t = 2.35, p = .024$). In other words, men who perceived themselves as highly desirable to women reported wanting to wait longer to get married after viewing pictures of babies, but men who perceived themselves as less desirable to women did not.
DISCUSSION

The present study was prompted by Charles Darwin’s decision to get married. Despite generating several pros and cons for marriage, Darwin came to the clear conclusion that marriage was the path for him. We believe Darwin’s decision was heavily guided by the first pro on his list: children. Our hypothesis was that thinking about the sexual selection aspects of evolution primed “children” in Darwin’s mind, and the desire to fulfill the evolutionary need of parenting pushed Darwin toward marriage. The present study examined whether activating a parenting need in students through viewing pictures of cute babies changed the age at which men and women reported wanting to marry. Exposure to parenting primes led women to report a lower desired age for marriage, list a higher proportion of positive thoughts about getting married in the next five years, and
weigh those thoughts more positively. On the other hand, men reported a higher desired age for marriage, lower proportion of positive thoughts, and less positive valence of their thoughts after viewing images of babies.

As predicted, photos of babies made women associate more positive thoughts with marriage and made them want to marry sooner. In light of the situated inference model of priming (Loersch & Payne, 2011), this context effect can be explained by the idea that viewing images of cute babies caused favorable thoughts to be more accessible when making evaluations toward marriage. The results for women were consistent with biological facts that females of many species, including humans, have only a limited number of years to reproduce and that their optimal reproductive strategy involves parenting rather than indiscriminate mating (Trivers, 1972). During times of economic recession, it becomes more clearly observable that women exhibit increased effort to attract a mate in order to acquire resource security (Hill, Rodeheffer, Griskevicius, Durante, & White, 2012); in the same sense, women who marry gain access to their spouse’s resources to help in raising offspring and thus would desire to pursue mate acquisition and retention goals to fulfill parenting needs.

The central hypothesis was not supported for men, which seems on the surface to suggest that Charles Darwin was not “primed” by his theory of evolution to seek marriage. It is important to note that the men in the present study averaged 19.81 years old, whereas Charles Darwin was 29 going on 30 when he decided to marry as soon as possible. Photos of babies may have primed the men in this study to be more concerned with acquiring resources and status before marriage, perhaps leading them to have the costs associated with having children more salient when making their evaluations.
Parental investment theory (Trivers, 1972) explains that men need to compete more with each other to gain reproductive opportunities by showing an ability to invest in potential offspring, which often manifests itself as holding the highest resources. In one study, men who rated ads with attractive female models reported higher momentary feelings of ambition and adopted a more positive attitude toward having a large income compared to men who did not have visual exposure to women, conforming to female mate preferences for status and resource access and therefore improving one’s chances of securing a mate (Roney, 2003). Men may evaluate their attitude toward marriage less positively if the thoughts made salient by the baby prime included the resources required for parenting.

Furthermore, men in the present study who perceived themselves as high quality mates were the most affected by the parenting manipulation. It is possible that these men, who presumably would have less difficulty finding a mate, may not have wanted to settle down yet. Men may have a longer reproductive window than women, but once they reach 30, they also have dwindling prospects of attracting young, healthy, fertile women. When 20 year old men see photos of babies, it might remind them, or at least those of them who think they are highly desirable to women (see Figure 5), that marriage will likely curtail their unrestricted mating. When 29 year old men like Darwin see pictures of babies, in contrast, it might remind them that they need to court a woman quickly before they become relatively undesirable partners.

The present results, however, suggest that young women who see photos of cute babies, even in a context unrelated to marriage, start thinking more positive thoughts about marriage and report wanting to get married sooner than had they not seen the photos. Attitude Representation Theory (Lord & Lepper, 1999) explains that a person’s
response to a stimulus is dependent on its perceived properties and the person’s subjective representation of the stimulus at that time. It is possible that viewing images of babies caused women in this study to perceive the positive aspects of marriage, while men focused more on the negative aspects, such as resources required. The thoughts toward marriage brought to Darwin’s mind must have caused him to perceive more positive aspects of marriage than the men in this study who were primed with parenting motives. In short, temporary salience of babies primes women’s parenting needs.

Limitations and Future Directions

While the results of the baby prime on attitudes toward marriage were consistent with our prediction for women but not for men, there were several limitations in the present study that can be addressed in the future to build upon these findings. The sample of the current study consisted of university students who averaged 19.62 years for women and 19.81 years for men, so these students may differ in their timing of reproductive goals compared to the general population and may be affected by the baby prime in a different way than a 29 or 30-year-old like Charles Darwin. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2010), the average age of marriage is 26.1 for women, compared to 28.2 for men; students in this study were several years younger, indicating that marriage may not be a high priority in their current lives. Additionally, if securing resources is involved in a male’s desire to pursue marriage, most of these college students would still be working on securing a job, while Darwin likely held adequate resources. Future studies need to include men and women across a wide age range in order to draw conclusions about what may or may not have affected Darwin, who was likely older than the average age of marriage when he generated his list. Furthermore, the study did not control for
participants who do not wish to have any children in the future or who do not wish to marry, so the baby prime would not have influenced their attitudes toward marriage to the same degree.

Another limitation of the current study is that it only measured attitudes toward marriage by including self-report items regarding desired age for marriage and listed thoughts toward marriage. Future studies may wish to measure effects of parenting primes on mate acquisition and retention goals by asking participants to rate their willingness to go on potential types of dates, having participants write for several minutes about marriage, or rating ads that feature married couples vs. single individuals. These measures might reflect the effects of a parenting prime on attitudes toward marriage in a less overt way.

In addition, other methods of priming parenting may have different levels of effectiveness at influencing attitudes toward marriage. Few studies in the past have primed parenting, so other techniques of priming parenting across a wider range could be used in the future to add to the understanding of how and why these priming effects are seen. For example, other parenting primes might include viewing a social media newsfeed that includes an ultrasound/pregnancy announcement, rating ads or commercials that include infants or products used by infants, asking participants to select a children’s book that they would read to their child, or having participants select items they would pack for their child’s school lunch. Perhaps priming different stages of parenting by altering the relative age of the child based on the priming method used would impact the thoughts generated about marriage.
Future studies may also wish to examine possible mediators to explain why females who view baby images demonstrate more positive attitudes toward marriage. It is possible that females who see pictures of cute babies may rate thoughts regarding marriage more positively due to wishful thinking about marriage; thoughts about marriage may cause women to become overly optimistic about the probability of having a successful marriage (Vosgerau, 2010). For instance, women who view baby images may underestimate divorce rates or demonstrate more wishful word completions that are related to marriage. Related to this idea of wishful thinking, it is also possible that women who view images of babies will demonstrate more egalitarian responses on the Marriage Role Expectation Inventory (Dunn, 1960) in the hopes that their marriage will include shared responsibilities rather than traditional duties attributed to a wife.

**Concluding Remarks**

The current study examined the effects of parenting primes on attitudes toward marriage and revealed information regarding sex differences and the relationships between evolutionary needs, which will be useful in developing future studies. Baby primes caused women to have a more positive attitude toward marriage, while men desired to wait a few more years to get married after viewing baby images. These results were inconsistent with our prediction that Darwin had been primed by his thoughts of children in his decision to marry, but future studies may reveal additional factors that played a role, such as age. A greater understanding of priming mechanisms is important to further knowledge in how attitudes are formed and the processes that shape them.
APPENDIX

Instructions for Perceptual Weight Task:

The first study you will complete is the Perceptual Weight Task. In this study, we are interested in assessing students' perceptual ability. You will see a set of images of 3 comparable objects and be asked to rank your perception of the weights of the items pictured.

Look at the three images below and drag the pictures up or down so that the item you perceive to be heaviest is #1, the item you perceive to be in the middle is #2, and the item you perceive to be the lightest is #3.

Category 1:

Category 2:

Category 3:
Category 4:

Category 5:

Category 6:

Category 7:

For 1/2 of Participants:

For 1/2 of Participants:

No Category 7.
Instructions for Future Plans Task:

You will now complete the Future Plans Study. This study is interested in gaining information regarding students' future plans and goals.

Questions for Future Plans Task:

1. What is your attitude toward getting married in the next 5 years? (Where -5 = Very Negative and +5 = Very Positive)

   -5   -4   -3   -2   -1   +1   +2   +3   +4   +5

2. How old do you want to be when you get married? _______ years old

3. If you had to choose, how much would you prefer spending your time pursuing getting married versus pursuing a career? (Where -5 = prefer pursuing career and +5 = prefer pursuing marriage)

   -5   -4   -3   -2   -1   +1   +2   +3   +4   +5

4. List the pros and cons that came to mind when you were evaluating your attitude toward getting married in the next 5 years. Don’t bother listing thoughts that are neutral, just the ones that you think are good or bad about you getting married in the next 5 years. There’s no specific number of thoughts you have to list. You don’t have to fill in every single line, just list the good or bad things that came to mind. You can move on any time after spending 1 minute on this page. Just take as long as necessary for you to show what pros and cons came to mind.

   Thought 1 ___________
   Thought 2 ___________
5. Please rate how negative or positive each of these thoughts are (Where -5 = Very Negative and +5 = Very Positive):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thought #1:</th>
<th>-5</th>
<th>-4</th>
<th>-3</th>
<th>-2</th>
<th>-1</th>
<th>+1</th>
<th>+2</th>
<th>+3</th>
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<td>+2</td>
<td>+3</td>
<td>+4</td>
<td>+5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. Are you currently in a romantic relationship?

   Yes

   No

   Not Sure

   If yes, how long have you been in your current relationship (in months)? ______

7. Are you currently married?

   Yes

   No

8. Do you have any children?

   Yes

   No

   Currently expecting
9. How would you best characterize your sexual orientation?

   Heterosexual

   Bisexual

   Homosexual

10. Please rate the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following statements

   (where 1 = disagree and 7 = agree)

   Members of the opposite sex that I like, tend to like me back.
   Members of the opposite sex notice me.
   I receive many compliments from members of the opposite sex.
   Members of the opposite sex are not very attracted to me.
   I receive sexual invitations from members of the opposite sex.
   Members of the opposite sex are attracted to me.
   I can have as many sexual partners as I choose.
   I do not receive many compliments from members of the opposite sex.

Suspicion Check:

What do you think was the purpose of the Perceptual Weight Task Study? ______________
_____________________________________________________________________________

What do you think was the purpose of the Future Plans Task Study? _________________
_____________________________________________________________________________

Did you think there was there any connection between the Perceptual Weight Task Study and the Future Plans Task Study?

   If there was any connection, what might it have been? ____________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________
REFERENCES


